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Notes on the Butterflies of Corsica, 1972

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Introduction

The following notes are the result of collecting in northern and central Corsica during August 1972. The occasion was a family camping holiday, using a series of public camp sites and camping areas as a base for exploring a variety of habitats at different levels.

Bretherton and De Worms (1963) have produced an account of collecting in Corsica in July and early August together with a useful annotated list of the butterfly fauna of the island. Their account is supplemented by a note by Sir George Johnson. Johnson's collection was made during the first half of August in the region around Porto, about 80 km. to the north of the capital Ajaccio on the west coast.

We were on Corsica for three weeks, from Saturday, 5th August until Friday 25th of that month. We feel that our account may be of some interest in that we collected over a period of a number of days in two areas on the north coast of the island, which was not visited by Bretherton and De Worms or by Johnson. We also visited some of the classic mountain sites described by the former authors but at a time at least a fortnight later in the summer than they. A comparison of our observation with theirs is therefore also of some interest.

We arrived in Corsica on the evening of the 5th of August by car ferry from Nice and set up our camp at a site some 4 km. from Calvi, our port of arrival. The camp site is situated at the coast and on the east bank of the small River Figarella which rises in the mountains some 20 km. to the south.

We left Calvi on the 8th August and travelled to the attractive little town of St Florent on the gulf of that name just to the west of the north-eastern peninsula, Cap Corse. We then left St Florent by way of Bastia for the mountainous interior on the 11th August and motored along route N193 by the River Golo to Corte. There we camped by the river in the Gorge de la Restonica for three nights. This was one of the areas visited by Bretherton and De Worms. Our next base was also visited by them: this was Vizzavona, where we camped in the famous forest for three nights before leaving for the west coast on 17th August.

After spending two days to the south of Ajaccio, where we did virtually no collecting, we returned to Calvi by way of the magnificent and sometimes terrifying mountainous coast road N199, incidentally passing through Porto where Johnson collected. Accommodation even for campers is difficult in the Porto region in late August and we drove on to our original camp site near Calvi, which served as our base for the remaining six days.

Of the 55 species of butterfly listed by Bretherton and De Worms as certainly occurring in Corsica since 1900, we caught 31 and saw and certainly identified 3 more. We neither took nor saw any species from their "doubtfully recorded" list.

We will first include some notes on each locality and its butterfly fauna and expand these by further details of the taxonomy and ecology of a few of the more interesting species.

Localities and fauna

The camp site at Calvi is situated between the main Calvi-St Florent road and the sea, and on the bank of the River Figarella which here is a sluggish and somewhat polluted stream. Part of the site may once have been cultivated land but must have degenerated to rough weedy pasture before the site was laid out. To the east of this part of the site the fields continued and were covered with waist or even shoulder-high herbaceous weeds. A number of peach and other fruit trees are present on the site itself.

Between the open area and the sea a small rather dark wood of large, mostly deciduous, trees also forms part of the camp site and from this a path lined by high wild herbaceous plants leads down to the sea parallel to the river.

During our first period at the Calvi camp site the commonest butterflies in the open area were undoubtedly *Pyronia tithonus* and *Polyommatus icarus flavocinctata* Rowland Brown. Because of the lateness of the season males of the former species were very uncommon and, when seen, very worn, whereas the females were numerous, particularly and characteristically in thickets and on high weeds. This was also the case with the much less numerous *Maniola jurtina hispulla*, which was also fairly common. In the case of the common blue *P. icarus*, however, it was the males which were

conspicuous in the low weedy grass of the site itself although the females, because of their more cryptic colouring, may have been commoner than was apparent. The species was accompanied by a few specimens of *Lycaena phleas*, *Coenonympha pamphilus* and *Celastrina argiolus*.

Apart from a specimen of *Vanessa atalanta* seen by the river path the remaining species seen during our first short stay at Calvi were all of the family Pieridae. *Pieris rapi* was common, but not so numerous as one might expect, *P. brassicae* less so. We took one specimen (a female) of *Pontia daplidice* flying along a sandy path bordered by scrubby vegetation east of the camp site and saw what may have been other specimens flying over the low dunes by the sea to which the path led. Finally we took one specimen of *Colias crocea*, a female, form *helice*. Interestingly this specimen and another, also *helice*, taken at Bocognano (see below) were the only members of this species we saw on Corsica.

During our second period in the Calvi area we both caught and saw a greater variety of species, partly due to our longer stay, partly to concentration on the wooded area of the camp site and partly to collection in a wide surrounding area.

Of the species collected or seen before *V. atalanta* (several specimens) *P. tithonus*, *C. pamphilus*, *M. jurtina hispulla* (a good male taken), *L. phleas*, *P. icarus* and *Pieris brassicae* were still present.

In addition specimens of the scarce swallowtail *Iphiclides podalirius* were to be seen flying around the tops of the fruit trees.

The wooded area of the camp site proved rich in species. *Pararge aegeria* was common and we came to realise that the magnificent fritillary *Pandoriana pandora* was relatively common. Specimens, however, flew at about twenty feet or more and settled in trees at that height, only occasionally swooping down to visit thistles and other flowers. This behaviour may be unusual for this species and was in contrast to that which we saw in the mountains (see below). We managed, however, to net one female.

A clearing at the edge of the wood bordered on one side by trees and otherwise nearly surrounded by bramble thickets was particularly fruitful. There we encountered *Leptidae sinapis* (common), *Polygonia c-album* (common) and *Syn-tarucus pirithous* in addition to the species noted which we had seen on our previous visit. We took four specimens of *S. pirithous* (3 males, 1 female). Of these one male is quite exceptionally small with a forewing length of less than 10 mm. (base to apex): the other three fall within the 12-13 mm range given by Higgins & Riley (1970). One specimen of *Limenitis reducta* Staudinger (*L. rivularis* auct. incl. Bretherton & De Worms) was seen persistently returning to an inaccessible part of the bramble thicket. A specimen of *Vanessa cardui* was also seen near the wood feeding on very tall purple

thistles. Our only skipper *Carcharodus alceae* was taken in the overgrown field next to the camp site on 22nd August.

One of our particular aims in butterfly hunting in Corsica was to attempt to trap the spectacular *Charaxes jasius jasius*. This sole European representative of a large African genus was not seen by Bretherton and De Worms, but was trapped in some numbers by Johnson in the type of trap commonly used for the genus (Owen 1971).

Much of the lowlands and foothills of Corsica are covered by the *maquis*, a richly scented arid scrubland. In the *maquis*, *Arbutus unedo*, the strawberry tree, foodplant of *C. jasius*, is common in many places. We first hung our trap on August 18th in an area where *Arbutus* was common, south of Pte. de Sette Nave bordering the Gulf of Ajaccio, but two days yielded no specimens. In the Calvi area, however, we trapped three fresh specimens and saw several more.

There we first hung the trap, baited with banana pulp and a few drops of wine, near the village of Moncale about 7 km. SSE of the camp site. This was on August 21st. We started to return to camp via a road that crossed the Figarella and near the bridge saw, but failed to net, at least one specimen feeding on a small patch of very dry rotten plums presumably left by a visitor. We also saw another specimen of *L. reducta* by the river and collected a specimen of *Coenonympha corinna* by the roadside. We then returned to the trap to find that we had one very large female *C. jasius*. Its winglength is over 50 mm compared to the range 38/41 mm (male . . . "female larger") given by Higgins and Riley. When near the trap we saw one specimen of *Papilio machaon*.

We subsequently trapped two male *C. jasius* together on August 22nd at about 5 km. inland from Calvi and very little above sea level. On August 24th, while none was trapped, we saw at least half a dozen individuals in flight near the same locality.

Finally at Calvi it is worth noting that other butterflies can be trapped in the same manner and on our last day we secured specimens of *V. atalanta*, *P. c-album* and *Hipparchia aristaeus aristaeus* (the only one we saw near Calvi) in the trap at the camp site.

At St. Florent we collected on both the 9th and 10th of August at two principal localities, one along a road leading from our sea-side camp site towards the town, the other by the bank of the River Aliso at the end of that road. In the high hedge bordering the south side of the road we took our only specimen (a male) of *Gonepteryx cleopatra cleopatra* in freshly emerged condition. We also took a male *Pontia daplidice*, two *Coenonympha corinna* and a pair of *M. jurtina hispulla*.

The riverside locality consisted of an area near sea level forming a "towpath" with thickets next to the river backed by a high bank. Here we took a female *P. daplidice* as well

as *L. sinapis*, *P. aegeria* and *P. icarus* as at Calvi. *P. rapi*, *P. brassicae* and *Pyrontia tithonus* were also in evidence. We saw but failed to catch several specimens of *Papilio machaon* on flowers at the base of the high bank. When pursued they flew up the face of the bank and disappeared.

Two other species are to be noted from St. Florent. A specimen of *Limenitis reducta* was seen flying at high speed in the very hot midday sun along the edge of the narrow beach of the bay east of the town and a large but very tattered *Iphiclides podalirius* was taken a few yards inland by a stream opening into the same bay.

In the mountain localities our stay near Corte was much more profitable than the short visit of Bretherton and De Worms, our stay in Vizzavona less so. En route for Corte we took our only specimen of *Issoria lathonia* at noon on August 11th by the roadside near the river Golo. This was at an altitude of less than 200 km., but the roadside with shrubs and small trees was still green. We may have seen a second specimen at camp level in the Restonica valley.

In the valley we took single specimens of *Gonepteryx rhamni*, *Vanessa cardui*, *Pararge aegeria*, *Lasiommata megera paramegaera*, *Hipparchia neomiris*, *Plebejus argus corsicus* and *Aricia agestis f. calida*. The last looked very like the Iberian species *A. cramera* with a complete series of bright orange lunules around the wings.

As at the two lowland localities *Pyronia tithonus* and *Polyommatus icarus* were common but we saw no specimens of *M. jurtina* anywhere in the mountains. *Hipparchia aristaeus* and *Coenonympha corinna* were also present in some numbers.

Three species of fritillary were present in the Gorge de la Restonica and their distribution is of some interest. We camped by an auberge on the banks of the river and most of our collecting was done there on the hills rising on either side of the river which were open shrub. The altitude was little above that of Corte, perhaps 500-600 m. All the species noted above, with the exception of *L. megera* were taken here. *Argynnis paphia immaculata* was very common and we were able to corroborate Bretherton and De Worms, observations on the habits of the f. *valesina* females, which tended to settle on mossy stones and were not seen feeding, whereas the normal females and the males were particularly attracted to the low yellow thistles mentioned by these authors. We did not, however, see sufficient numbers to be able to estimate the percentages of *valesina* females composing the polymorphism.

Pandoriana pandora (*P. maja* Cramer in B. & De W.) was fairly common but on the opposite (S.E. facing) bank to *A. paphia*. It was similarly attracted to thistles but difficult to catch: flying fast over open ground rather than in tall trees as we saw it at Calvi.

(to be continued)